

# Identifying Kentucky's Owls

Whoo's Whoo out there?

Kentucky hosts many species of owls. How can you tell each species apart?

Information and pictures of each species of owl that regularly occurs in Kentucky is listed below. Snowy Owl (*Nyctea scandiaca*) and Long-eared Owl (*Asio otus*) have also been recorded in Kentucky, but are not described below due to their extreme rarity.

To hear owl calls and find more pictures and information on owls, please visit:

<http://www.enature.com>

## **Barred Owl (*Strix varia*)**

**Status:** Common

**Seasonal Occurrence:** Year-round resident

**Distribution:** Statewide

**Preferred Habitat(s):** Forested areas, especially bottomland areas

**Nesting Habits:** Nests in hollow trees, but will also use nest boxes



Adult Barred Owl  
Photo by: Kate Heyden



Adult Barred Owl  
Photo by: Kate Heyden



This young Barred Owl has fallen from its nest tree.  
Photo by: Kate Heyden

**Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*)**

**Status:** Common

**Seasonal Occurrence:** Year-round resident

**Distribution:** Statewide

**Preferred Habitat(s):** Forested areas, semi-forested areas and semi-open farmland

**Nesting Habits:** Nests in old crow or hawk nests made from sticks, but will also use hollow trees



This adult Great-horned Owl has an injured wing.  
Photo by: Kathy Caminiti



Great-horned Owl nest in a dead tree.  
Photo by: Kathy Caminiti





This young Great-horned Owl just fledged!  
Photo by: Kathy Caminiti



A close up view of a young Great-horned  
Owl.  
Photo by: Kathy Caminiti

**Eastern Screech-Owl (*Otus asio*)**

**Status:** Common

**Seasonal Occurrence:** Year-round resident

**Distribution:** Statewide

**Preferred Habitat(s):** Forested areas, wooded edges, semi-forested areas and semi-open farmland

**Nesting Habits:** Nests in tree cavities, but will also use nest boxes

**Note:** Screech Owls usually come in one of two colors: gray or red. Both can be found in Kentucky. A brown morph can also be found, but is more common further south, especially in Florida.



Adult Eastern Screech-Owl (Red Morph)  
Photo by: Kate Heyden



Adult Screech Owl (Gray Morph)  
Photo by: John Lander





Recently fledged Eastern Screech-Owl (Gray Morph)  
Photo by: Kathy Caminiti



Recently fledged Eastern Screech-Owl (Red Morph)  
Photo by: Kathy Caminiti

**Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*)**

**Status:** Uncommon / Rare

**\*Kentucky Species of Greatest Conservation Need \***

**Seasonal Occurrence:** Year-round resident

**Distribution:** Statewide, though less common in eastern Kentucky

**Preferred Habitat(s):** Open areas: grassland, pasture, hayfield, cropfield, old field, open marsh, reclaimed strip-mine land, etc.

**Nesting Habits:** Nests in hollow trees, silos, grain bins, barns, building crevices, and will also use nest boxes

**Note:** Please report nesting Barn Owls by calling 1-800-858-1549 or by e-mailing [kathryn.heyden@ky.gov](mailto:kathryn.heyden@ky.gov). Please visit our Barn Owl page to learn more about Kentucky's

Barn Owls at:

[INSERT LINK TO BARN OWL MAIN PAGE](#)



Adult Barn Owl  
Photo by: KDFWR



Six young Barn Owls  
Photo by: KDFWR



This young Barn Owl fell from its nest and was taken to a licensed wildlife rehabilitator to recover.  
Photo by: KDFWR



Adult Barn Owl  
Photo by: John MacGregor

**Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*)**

**Status:** Uncommon / Rare

**\*Kentucky Species of Greatest Conservation Need \***

**Seasonal Occurrence:** Usually observed in winter, observed very rarely during summer in some locations.

**Distribution:** Winter- Statewide, though more rare in eastern Kentucky. Summer- Nesting confirmed in west-central Kentucky in Ohio and Muhlenberg Counties in the late 1980's.

**Preferred Habitat(s):** Open areas: grassland, pasture, hayfield, old field, reclaimed strip-mine land, etc.

**Nesting Habits:** This species does not regularly nest in Kentucky. However, documented nests in Kentucky were found on the ground in grassy areas.

**Note:** In winter, Short-eared Owls will often form communal roosts (congregations of several owls which sleep in the same vicinity).



Adult Short-eared Owl  
Photo by: Ellis Laudermilk



Adult Short-eared Owl  
Photo by: Kate Heyden



**Northern Saw-whet Owl (*Aegolius acadicus*)**

**Status:** Uncommon / Rare

**Seasonal Occurrence:** Usually observed in the fall and spring, but also (sometimes) during the winter

**Distribution:** Likely occurs statewide

**Preferred Habitat(s):** Forested areas, wooded edges, semi-forested areas and semi-open farmland

**Nesting Habits:** This species does not nest in Kentucky. It nests in Canada and the Northern US. It migrates through and may occasionally winter in Kentucky.



Northern Saw-whet Owl  
Photo by: Kate Heyden